

Gaslight News

October 2012

Historical Society of Riverton

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Riverton, NJ 08077

Incorporated 1978



Jane Estes returns Nov. 15 with an early holiday gift, "A Christmas Past"

The popular Hagley Guide and Lecturer will trace the origins of many of our yuletide traditions

Hagley Museum Guide and Lecturer Jane Peters Estes returns to the Riverton Historical Society with her delightful overview of the origins of many of our secular Christmas traditions. The free program is open to the public and takes place at 7:00 p.m. November 15, 2012 in the Media Center at Riverton Public School, Fifth and Howard Streets, Riverton, NJ.

Do you know the origin of the custom of trimming a tree or hanging a stocking? There are sure to be some surprises amongst the historical insights offered by our accomplished speaker. With an eye to the continuing observance of the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, Ms. Estes will especially emphasize Christmas customs observed during that conflict and further illustrate her topic with a display of typical Civil War era Christmas gifts.

An active member of various regional historical organizations for almost thirty years, the popular speaker's repertoire of historically themed programs includes *Civil War Nurses*, *Fashions of the 1860s*, *Grave Matters* (Victorian Mourning Customs), *Wedding Customs and Traditions*, *Women's Lifestyles of the 1860s*, *Vivandieres*, and *Pets of the Past*. Ms. Estes last appeared here in October 2011, to present *The Battle of Gettysburg: Where Were the Women?* - JMc

Historical re-enactor, speaker and lecturer, museum guide, and Starr Tour Director—Jane Peters Estes in Civil War era dress.



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Open this
issue as a
PDF file on

the HSR website and you will
find that terms printed in blue
text are hyperlinks which
open relevant websites.

RESIDENCE OF CHARLES
M. BIDDLE Cor. Bank and
Lippincott Aves., Riverton,
New Jersey, 10 miles from
Philadelphia

"The most notable residence
of Riverton, picturesquely
situated on the Delaware..."

[Philadelphia and notable Philadelphia-
ans. New York: King, 1902. pg. 92](http://www.brynmawr.edu/iconoc/kh/maln6.html)



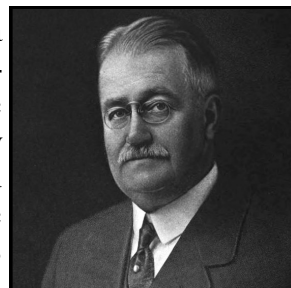
Restoration of distressed Biddle Mansion now underway

New owner hopes to restore the long neglected historic home to its former splendor

When *Preservation New Jersey* listed the former 207 Bank Avenue mansion of Charles Miller Biddle on its list of [Ten Most Endangered Historic Places](#) in 2007, it only confirmed what many residents had already feared for decades — that the once magnificent Second Empire home seemed headed for extinction. The recent purchase of the home

this past August by a new owner committed to restoring the historic property may be the good news for which the community has waited so long.

An article in the June 23, 1887



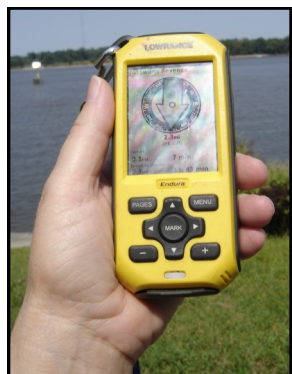
Charles M. Biddle c.1921 as pictured in the *Encyclopedia of Pennsylvania Biography*

See BIDDLE MANSION on 3



Retired educator, Cynthia Klabe Robertson, a former Riverton resident who attended Riverton Public School attempts to explain geocaching to muggles.

Join her in the adventure that has been described by some enthusiasts as using billion dollar satellites to find Tupperware in the woods.



PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA ROBERTSON
ABOVE:
hand-held GPS for geocaching

On your computer, go to geocaching.com and watch a video, *Geocaching in 2 Minutes*, or learn more at *Geocaching 101*

Register for free to get started. Access to all features requires \$30 premium membership



Geocaching: Hi-Tech Treasure Hunting

Fall is a great time to try this fun and family-friendly outdoor activity

Three years ago, a friend introduced me to geocaching, but it was not until Santa brought me a personal GPS (Global Positioning System) for Christmas in 2009 that I became an active participant. What is geocaching? Geocaching (pronounced geo-cashing) is one of the fastest growing outdoor recreational activities in the world today! Here is a little tutorial.

What is geocaching?

According to geocaching.com geocaching is a high-tech treasure hunting game played throughout the world by adventure seekers equipped with GPS devices. The basic idea is to locate hidden containers, called geocaches, outdoors and then share your experiences online. Geocaching is enjoyed by people from all age groups, with a strong sense of community and support for the environment.

The activity is supported by the website geocaching.com. Registering is free, but a premium membership is required to access all their features and runs only \$30 a year.

How did geocaching begin?

For years, only the military could receive extremely accurate GPS coordinates. Something called Selective Availability (SA) interfered with the accuracy of civilian GPS receivers. In 2000, the U.S. Government turned off SA, and overnight the accuracy of GPS technology improved tenfold. Three days later, Dave Ulmer hid a "stash" in Portland, OR and posted the coordinates online. Within a month, the new sport of geocaching was founded.* Today, there are over 1.8 million caches hidden around the world with over 5 million registered geocachers trying to find them.

What do you need to geocache?

To geocache, you need a GPS receiver or a cell phone with internet access. You also need the GPS coordinates for the various

caches that can be found online. With my GPS, I can download cache information directly from my computer. Hard-core geocachers use maps and a compass. You should carry some trinkets or small treasures that you can trade. For treks into woods and fields, be sure to dress for the weather and conditions.

How much is a GPS receiver?

A GPS can run anywhere from \$69 to \$500. The more expensive the model, the more bells and whistles it will have. But you do not need to spend a lot of money to have fun. In fact, a beginner should probably start with the cheaper and less complicated models.

Now, there is even an app for that. Once the sole domain of the handheld GPS unit, geocaching has enjoyed a recent surge in popularity by the proliferation of GPS enabled smart phones. Currently, the Android, iPhone, webOS, and Windows Phone mobile platforms each have a number of geocaching applications available, some with trial versions with limited functionality. Costs vary from free to \$9.99, and an app is an inexpensive way to enjoy this entertaining outdoor adventure game. See the ease and excitement with which you can experience geocaching using the iPhone app in this 30-second video. www.geocaching.com/iphone/

What is a cache?

Finding a cache is the goal of a geocacher. They can be as large as an ammo box or as small as a thimble. Some geocachers get fancy and purchase caches that look like rocks, logs, pinecones, golf balls and bricks. Others use magnetic key boxes. They can be found under leaves or rocks, in trees, hidden in bushes, under logs, under park benches and behind fences. Almost all caches contain a log-sheet.

See **GEOCACHING** on 5

*Information is from Geocaching for Dummies by Joel McNamara.

207 Bank named to NJ's Ten Most Endangered Historic Places in 2007

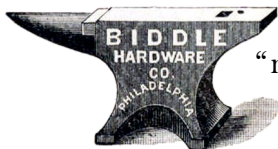
BIDDLE MANSION from 1

edition of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* described Riverton's "quiet air of refinement and seclusion, indicating culture as well as wealth," and noted that a number of "merchant princes of the Keystone metropolis" had erected "fine commodious mansions." Among them was Charles M.



207 Bank Avenue - July 2012 PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN MCCORMICK
The rounded veranda was doubtless once a place to entertain guests or simply to watch the rhythms of people enjoying activities along Bank Avenue and on the Delaware River. New owner, Mrs. Helen Hughes, wants to renovate the porch and revive the earlier elegance of the mansion.

Biddle, wealthy principal owner of the Biddle Hardware Company of Philadelphia and son of founder Robert Biddle, who came to own the residence in 1878, about two years after its construction in 1876 at a cost of \$100,000. The *Inquirer* called it "the landmark of the town," and claimed that on clear day its large tower "may be readily discerned from the Pennsylvania shore."



Residents became concerned with the prospects for the expansive villa with the spectacular views of the Delaware River in 1962, when the owner divided it into apartments.

Gradually, the structure fell into disrepair. The beautiful façade of Pennsylvania

greenstone became pockmarked with gaps where pieces fell off and were not replaced. Broken pieces of the rounded veranda's rotting conical roof were not repaired. Clumsy renovations and neglected grounds caused townsfolk to worry what would become of the place that Moses King, in his popular 1902 guidebook *Philadelphia and Notable Philadelphians*, called "...the most notable residence of Riverton." It seemed that its fate was to become infamous.

Further adding to the ongoing atrophy during decades of neglect and mistreatment, the structure caught fire in 1978, destroying the elegant convex mansard tower which originally crowned the architectural gem, and the owner did not replace it. Inside, gypsum wallboard now replaces the original first-floor ballroom's oak woodwork from Germany's Black Forest, and several open holes are visible in rooms where beautifully crafted fireplace mantles were simply torn out from walls and presumably sold as architectural



207 Bank Avenue - July 2012 PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN MCCORMICK
Rooms with missing woodwork and moldings and a cavity once occupied by a magnificent fireplace stand in silent witness against the negligence suffered by this historically significant house.

salvage. No wonder that in recent years many have despaired that anyone would be able to rescue the place from its apparent path of destruction.



Biddles in the Conservatory at 207 Bank Avenue

CHARLES MILLER BIDDLE
one of Riverton's

"merchant princes of the Keystone metropolis"
The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1887

Charles M. Biddle was a direct descendant of William Biddle, a member of the Society of Friends and one of the original proprietors of West Jersey.

In 1861, at just eighteen years of age, Charles entered the family hardware business that his father and uncle had started in 1837, as an apprentice. He became partner by 1865, and eventually became sole owner in 1873, after they retired and he bought out the last remaining senior member. Charles acquired the Supplee Hardware Company in 1914, forming the corporation of Supplee-Biddle Hardware, and built it into one of the largest hardware wholesalers in the East.

Mr. Biddle held memberships in various organizations and served on many boards including, Logan Trust Co. President, Director of Riverton and Palmyra Water Co., Director of Riverton Iron Pier Co., Director of Phila. Chamber of Commerce 30 years, Treasurer of Swarthmore College, President of Hardware Merchants & Mfg. Assn. of Phila., National Hardware Assn. Member, Union League of Philadelphia member, Vice-Commodore of Riverton Yacht Club 14 years, Riverton Country Club member, Society of Friends member

[Scannell's New Jersey's First Citizens and State Guide, J. J. Scannell, 1919 p.509-510](#)

[Encyclopedia of Pennsylvania Biography, Volume 13, Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1921 p.205-207](#)

"Charles M. Biddle Dies in Florida," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 22, 1922, p. 6

See **BIDDLE MANSION** on 4

Restoration to "its prior grandeur" is the aim of the inspired new owner

IMAGE CREDIT:
Martin J. Donnelly
Antique Tools
mjdtools.com



Do You Want a Refrigerator?

Experience has convinced us that the LEONARD DRY AIR REFRIGERATORS are the best. They combine absence of smell, economy of ice, dry air and beauty of finish. We are handling these in large lots, and for a short time only offer them at retail at our stores,

507 and 509 COMMERCE Street,
First Street above MARKET.
BIDDLE HARDWARE CO.
Wholesale Agents.



R. & W.C. Biddle & Company
panel raising plane

Biddle Hardware Co. envelope, 1893

Biddle Hardware ad, May 28, 1889,
Philadelphia Inquirer, Page 8

SBH Six Lever Supplee-Biddle
Hardware padlock

Do you have any items made by Biddle Hardware Company or Supplee-Biddle Hardware Co.? Earlier still would be an antique from the original firm started by Charles' father and uncle, R. & W.C. Biddle & Company. Please send a photo or a scanned image of any relevant ephemera to the Society. We appreciate these virtual contributions as well as donations of actual items.

BIDDLE MANSION from 3



Vintage postcard "Biddle Mansion, Riverton, NJ"

IMAGE CREDIT: PAUL W. SCHOPP COLLECTION

This past July several potential buyers inquired of the HSR website concerning the history of the home after a lender foreclosed on the mortgage and sought to sell the property at a reported listing price of \$400,000. One buyer had plans to turn it into a bed & breakfast and exclusive catering venue; another would use it for a personal residence. With a listing less than half of previous asking prices, real concern arose that perhaps a developer would find it feasible to raze the structure and subdivide the tract for homesites.

Ultimately, one buyer had to prevail, and fortunately, in the view of preservationists,

it was Mrs. Helen Hughes who plans to use the first floor as her residence and use the upper floors for apartment rentals. She hopes to move in by Thanksgiving.

Mrs. Hughes has been intrigued by the mansion since she was a girl. The Moorestown resident has fond memories of visiting Riverton as a child and enjoying the path along the river. She mentioned in an email to the HSR website in which she requested information about the mansion's early days that she "would like to restore the front to its prior grandeur." Later, when she took ownership of the property, she wrote of the challenges and intrigues of renovation and expressed the "hope to be a worthy steward to this amazing property."

As indicated by tradesmen's signs posted in the front lawn at 207 Bank Avenue and the porch roof repairs now underway, the long neglected centerpiece of Riverton's finest stately riverfront mansions may yet survive the harsh treatment it received for so long and soon reclaim its place as "the landmark of the town." The Historical Society of Riverton is encouraged and wishes Mrs. Hughes the greatest success in her rehabilitation project.

Armed with vintage photographs of the historic home's exterior and her research of similar works by architect Samuel Sloan, Mrs. Hughes has employed a small army of skilled craftspeople and designers in order to authentically renovate the residence. Proving problematic has been the difficulty of replicating interior design elements, since so much inside has been altered. If any reader of this publication has knowledge, information, or photographs that would help in faithfully completing the rehabilitation, please contact the Society at <http://rivertonhistory.com/contact> and we will forward the message to her.



207 Bank Avenue - October 2012 PHOTO CREDIT: JOHN MCCORMICK
Work on the veranda is underway.



Geocaching motto: “It’s not about what you find; it’s about the journey.”

GEOCACHING from 2

Some have a custom-made ink stamp (a geocacher should carry a small notebook for such occasions) and many contain treasure! I have found AA batteries (for GPS receivers), key chains, small toys, beads, pins, geocoins, sunglasses, pocket knives, lottery tickets and dog treats. Once you find a cache, you should sign the log, take a treasure (if you desire), leave a treasure, return the cache as you found it, and then log your find online. Even if you do not find the cache, you can log that, also.

What is a Travel Bug?

A Travel Bug is a trinket with a special trackable dog tag. Each tag has a unique number, which allows you to follow the progress of the Travel Bug online as it moves from cache to cache. The person who owns the Travel Bug will give it a goal. Maybe you want your Travel Bug to visit all 50 states. Others are just to see how far they can travel. I launched a Travel Bug in July 2010, in Philadelphia, and it is currently in North Wales, UK—having traveled 5286 miles to get there!

Why should you geocache?

Enthusiasts say, “It’s not about what you find; it’s about the journey.” Geocaching is a great way to get outside, discover places that you have never seen before, and to get some exercise. It can introduce you to historic sites, lead you to places with great views, and mentally challenge yourself (some caches can only be found by first solving puzzles, riddles, cryptograms, sudokus, etc.). You can do this family-friendly activity by yourself, with friends, and even in teams.

Is Burlington County a good place to geocache?

Yes! *Hundreds* of geocaches are hidden

right here in Burlington County in our parks, cities, and towns, and even in parking lots and cemeteries. Geocachers have secreted dozens of them in Amico Island, Pennington Park, Millcreek Park, Boundary Creek Park, and the nearby Palmyra Nature Cove. Rancocas State Park alone has over 30 caches concealed there.

Before searching for a cache, first, double-check your intended geocache online to make sure it is still operational. There are lots of muggles around (non-geocachers) and they have been known to make off with a cache—not knowing what it was. Second, always make sure to be aware of your surroundings wherever you may geocache. So, get the kids off the couch and have some fall fun!

After you start searching for caches, you may want to hide them as well. I currently have 14 caches (most with historic themes) under the name Seabrookgal. One geocache in Riverton is titled *Riverton Beetle*, and explains the history of Dreer’s Nursery and the Japanese beetle. I have started a New Deal series, taking geocachers to buildings and parks created during the New Deal including Strawbridge Lake Park, Cooper River Park, and the Riverton Post Office. Unfortunately, geocaching regulations make it hard to place caches at some sites (Palmyra Band Shell, Riverton School, Palmyra Football Stadium & Palmyra Borough Hall) because they are on school or government property or they are too close to railroad tracks. Another rule is that a new cache must also be at least a tenth of a mile away from an existing cache. I hope to provide geocachers with a little history lesson and some fun in addition to the outdoor workout.

BELOW: several types of geocaches including three different nano types (the smallest) which include a rock with nano underneath, a true nano, and a hollowed out screw), bison tubes (micros), a cammoed medicine bottle, a magnetic key holder, and a fake magnetic reflector

PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA ROBERTSON



opened caches with logs



CYNTHIA K. ROBERTSON

geocaching.com user name:
Seabrookgal

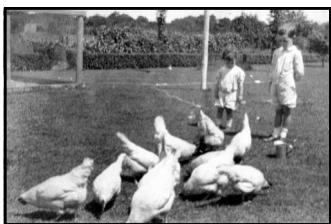


Like Christmas in July

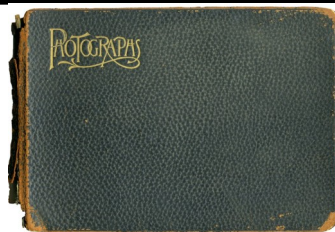
To a historian, getting another vintage postcard scan and seeing these photographic views of old Riverton is like getting an early Christmas present.

The nostalgic 1909 Clapsaddle designed Christmas postcard image above is one of several that we will display on the HSR website in the closing weeks of 2012, courtesy of collector Harlan Radford.

This summer former Riverton resident Hank Parrish Hackett, now living in North Carolina, was in Philadelphia on business, and I met him at his cousin Nancy Hall's, home on Cedar Street in Riverton.



Raising chickens in Riverton
IMAGE CREDIT: HANK PARRISH HACKETT PHOTO ALBUM



His album of treasured family photos proved to give a great sense of what Riverton looked like in the first decades of the last century.

His grandparents' former home is located at 901 Thomas Avenue on the corner of Shrewsbury facing the golf course. Hank remarked that it is funny to see it without a tree in sight.



Visit the Society website to view more of

901 Thomas Ave. 1905
IMAGE CREDIT: HANK PARRISH HACKETT PHOTO ALBUM

Hank's classic photos, and please send us your recollections, photos, scans, or historic items that will help us continue to make Riverton history.

- JMc



Riverton Tea Party - Elsie Biddle, Frishmuth Twins, Bertha Lippincott
IMAGE CREDIT: HANK PARRISH HACKETT PHOTO ALBUM



Visit the growing HSR website at <http://rivertonhistory.com/> for information regarding events, past issues of *Gaslight News*, membership information, links to Riverton School's Riverton Project, slide shows of vintage images, video clips, our blog, and more.

Readers: You are invited to Jane Estes' Nov. 15 program "Christmas Past" at Riverton School. Good news! Biddle mansion saved from demolition—will be rehabbed. Try investigating a new captivating hobby with a local history slant, Geocaching.

Gaslight News

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THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

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More Vets' Names

Borough Council's Riverton Military & Veterans Affairs Committee forwards us these names of veterans that will be installed on the Riverton War Memorial Honor Roll this next Veterans Day, November 2012.

Joseph D. Burns - Army

Elton Catoe - Navy

Donald D'Amato - Air Force

Alfred W. DeVece - Navy

Paul M. Hoad - Army

William Ulrich - Army

Anthony R. Wellens - Navy

Help us honor veterans on the HSR website page at [Riverton Remembers its Veterans](http://rivertonhistory.com/remembers-its-veterans).

We also need more photos of servicemen and women to match the names on the Memorial. Please send a scan by email, a photo by mail, or contact us if you need assistance.



- JMc



We may not have had a membership meeting since the spring, but know that your HSR Board Members have been busy working on several matters to fulfill the Society's mission to create an awareness of our heritage, to discover, restore and preserve local objects and landmarks, and to continue to expand our knowledge of the history of the Riverton area.

- ✍ Riverton Walking Tour #2
- ✍ Historical Interpretive Signage
- ✍ Newspaper Digitalization Project
- ✍ Steedle Moving and Storage: Recollections and Images
- ✍ Oral histories—suggestions?
- ✍ Riverton Gun Club History
- ✍ Digitalize *Gaslight News* back issues and get them online

- JMc

